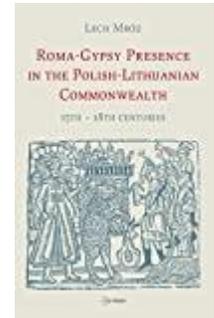


**Lech Mróz.** *Roma-Gypsy Presence in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: 15th-18th centuries.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015. Illustrations. 322 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-615505351-1.



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Lech Mróz in *Roma-Gypsy Presence in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: 15th-18th Centuries*, published by Central European University Press, introduces to an English-speaking audience a concentrated version of his lifetime of research into the topic of the history and perception of Gypsies in the Commonwealth. While covering such an extensive time period, Mróz, as might be expected, includes in his survey an impressive list of different kinds of sources: city registers, letters of introduction and guarantees of conduct, testimonies in criminal proceedings, municipal records, appointment documents related to Gypsy kings and elders, records from the legislation of the Sejm, and secondary sources. All of this information is mustered to argue that the Gypsy experience during the whole of Commonwealth history was not uniform, and, indeed, the negative stereotypes associated with Gypsies in the nineteenth century (such as criminality, thieving, and constant wandering) only really began to make inroads into Polish mentality later in the eighteenth century. What emerges from this research is that

Gypsies in the Commonwealth lived in a spectrum of situations. For example, on one end, some Gypsies lived as fully settled townsmen, while on the other end, some participated in a fully nomadic lifestyle. Indeed, the picture is often complicated by regional difference and the difference between law and reality. For example, the repressive measures against harboring wandering Gypsies introduced by the Sejm in mid-sixteenth-century Poland were not duplicated in the Lithuanian part of the realm, while even in locales where the discriminatory laws were in effect they were rarely sincerely enforced.

The mosaic of conditions revealed in this volume is based on an older, much more extensive, work in Polish, *Dzieje Cyganów–Romów w Rzeczypospolitej: XV-XVIII w.*, published in 2001 in Warsaw. The author explains the nature of the alterations in the English-language version, specifically noting that the number of documents presented, and also discussions of the nature of their provenance and preservation, is dramatically reduced to make the work more useful for a non-

Polish audience. The goal was to target people more interested in issues surrounding Gypsy and social history. At the same time, even the English-language book includes lots of material related to the sources themselves, such as many photos of the documents in their original form, at the end of each chapter. In this sense, the book succeeds remarkably with this balance of readability and the scholarly discussion of the historian's craft and activity, thereby allowing readers to taste the depth and difficulty of the research needed for this study while not discouraging nonspecialists from benefiting from the deep value of the sources themselves and what careful analysis can reveal from them.

The sensitive and political consequences of a work about a still-marginalized social group struggling for identity in the contemporary world is not lost on the author, and many of the related problems, and the author's choices regarding these problems, are addressed in the text. For example, knowledgeable readers will note that Mróz chooses to use the word "Gypsy" (*cygan* in Polish) as opposed to "Roma," which is used in many current organizations that focus on shared Roma ethnic identity. This choice is made based on the use of "Gypsy" as a term of self-identification for many people both today and in the times covered by this book.

A related issue is the utter lack of sources written by Gypsies themselves, especially during the period covered by the book. This means that most of the sources under examination from the Middle Ages to modern times are not particularly knowledgeable about the reality of Gypsy life and much less their actual lived experience. As the author notes, this situation has resulted in the creation of nineteenth-century through present-day accounts by Gypsy intelligentsia themselves, which Mróz believes to be, for the most part, often inaccurate and fantastical. This situation puts the author in the unenviable position of trying to write the history of an oppressed minority by

means of sources not written by this minority (and not containing their voice) while furthermore knowing that his own conclusions will likely not be deemed acceptable for any potential Gypsy audience for his work.

The political problems of identity do not abate after leaving the introduction of the work but instead morph into historical problems throughout the eight chapters of the book. These chapters, while roughly chronologically ordered, are also often distinguished by the source material they contain. For example, the third chapter focuses on documents related to one particularly well-sourced Gypsy (Piotr Rotemberg), the fourth focuses on government documents relating to repression of Gypsies within its borders, the sixth discusses documents mentioning Gypsy kings or elders, and so forth. These topical divisions allow the author to immerse readers into a certain set of questions and problems posed by these specific source types and invites the sort of analysis that emerges from a comparative and nuanced reading of similar or overlapping source material. For example, the numerous letters of introduction written for Rotemberg across large swathes of the Commonwealth are usefully compared to distinguish changes in attitudes toward Gypsies over time and space as his group wandered widely over many decades.

The first chapter documents the earliest mentions of Gypsies in Poland, which vastly diverge from the later stereotypical associations many have with this ethnic group. These references begin right at the beginning of the fifteenth century and include references to "Gypsies" paying city taxes, living in market squares, attaining city civic rights, serving as chamberlain to the king, and holding public office. These are settled, assimilated Gypsies who show little, if any, distinction in the sources from the population apart from the "cygan" designation attached to their names. This, of course, raises the inevitable question about what exactly "cygan" meant to both the people

bearing this designation and the local populations that applied it in their written civic sources. Mróz suggests that this is a matter of self-identification by the Gypsies themselves, and we should not question their “Gypsiness” (p. 47). Nevertheless, this does not answer the deeper questions historians have about the extent to which these early “Gypsies” share any meaningful historical and cultural connection to the people bearing the same name who arrived later into Commonwealth territory and experienced a very different reception and categorization from locals.

These doubts are not assuaged by the fact that the following (sixteenth) century, covered in the second chapter (as well as the third and fourth), shows remarkably divergent accounts regarding those with the “cygan” appellation. Most important, there appeared a sharp division between settled rural Gypsies and the mobile newcomers fleeing repression and expulsion in the (Holy Roman) empire. The “Gypsies” living in cities mentioned in the first chapter disappear, perhaps assimilated into the population. In the Commonwealth, many settled rural Gypsies held positions of influence and power; nevertheless, the sixteenth century also saw the first mentions of Gypsies in connection with horse stealing, fortune telling, and theft of money. Gypsies of all kinds continued to use Commonwealth courts to decide disputes and thereby showed signs of continued contact and connection to their host societies. During the sixteenth century, the first references to itinerant Gypsies as “Philistines” or “Egyptians” appeared in sources, in which Gypsies are contextualized in biblical terms as wanderers and exiles from a faraway homeland as penance for their initial rejection of Christian truth (pp. 75-77). All of this information shows that the experience and conditions of Gypsy life during the sixteenth century was still highly fluid and variable.

Chapter 3, as mentioned above, contains a unique case study of a sixteenth-century Gypsy and his troupe and allows us to trace his and his

troupe’s migrations and wandering throughout parts of the Commonwealth. This results from the fortuitous survival of a series of twenty-five letters related to Rotemberg spanning the years 1542-61. Rotemberg, while often receiving the name “Philistine,” also was on occasion referred to as “knight” or “count” (p. 91). Arriving in Pomerania in 1542, Rotemberg sought and received letters of introduction from Polish officials, both ecclesiastical and administrative, to legitimize his travels, secure protection from the state, and facilitate interactions with Commonwealth residents. One of these letters was even issued by the royal chancellery in Krakow, apparently on the orders of the monarch himself. Tellingly, in these letters, Rotemberg accepted the appellation and stereotypes of exiled Egyptians and allowed his wanderings to be interpreted as a holy penance and his troupe to be portrayed as pilgrims. As Mróz notes, this is an excellent example of a marginalized people using the stereotypes of broader society for their own benefit.

Near the end of our record of Rotemberg’s travel, the fortunes of his troupe and their status clearly began to diminish, and this corresponds with the first acts of the Polish Sejm ordering the expulsion of Gypsies, appearing in 1557. Additional acts and decrees would follow in the subsequent decades. The nature, scope, and actual effect of these repressive acts are the topic of chapter 4. Repressive measures were not simply targeted at Gypsies themselves but threatened even banishment for Polish citizens who harbored Gypsies on their property. No circumstance or event in Poland presaged these harsh measures, and Mróz suggests that they resulted from a copying of western European policies as Gypsies entered Poland in rising numbers fleeing expulsion elsewhere. The promulgation of practically identical measures repeatedly over time, as well as scant evidence of effective enforcement, Mróz believes, confirms that we should not overestimate the meaning of repressive laws or their impact on actual conditions on the ground. Importantly,

there is a marked divergence in tone and enforcement of repressive laws in Poland and Lithuania. Lithuania was slower to adopt anti-Gypsy pronouncements and they were, if anything, even less vigorously enforced. Importantly, the legal context and wording of anti-Gypsy restrictions were not so much targeted at Gypsies as a racial or ethnic group per se but against Gypsies as itinerant wanderers, and Gypsies were accepted if they agreed to settle. Mróz might be accused of trying too hard to minimize the seriousness of the effects of anti-Gypsy legislation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but his efforts are more of a corrective to past scholarship and stereotypes than a distortion he purposefully introduces.

The difficulty of pinpointing a universal situation of Commonwealth Gypsies, legal or social, in the seventeenth century is the subject of chapter 5. While there are unmistakable examples of the enforcement of banishment for harboring Gypsies, especially in parts of Poland, there are also cases of Gypsies marrying into the local nobility, receiving letters of introduction with travel permission from government officials, traveling to local fairs, paying taxes, and using Commonwealth courts to solve or register inter-Gypsy disputes. Mróz concludes that this apparent contradiction is resolved by understanding that the issue that provoked official anger was vagrancy and criminality in general, and not universal rejection of a people.

One famous attempt to control and regulate the Gypsy population was the appointment of Gypsy “kings” or “elders” by a series of Commonwealth monarchs between 1647 and 1780. Nineteen different individuals are identified as holding this position in one way or another, either over the whole Commonwealth or only over one of its halves. Since this is a complicated yet popular topic, Mróz uses chapter 6 to try to carefully disentangle the complicated origins and nature of these arrangements. Looking at the charters and privileges associated with these Gypsy kings, while comparing them with other documents connected

to their lives, Mróz tries to reconstruct the nature of their appointments and the scope of their duties. This chapter ends up seeming rather messy, as no clear standardization of the position of Gypsy “king” or “elder” ever seems to have definitively occurred, at least not for very long. Nevertheless, this chapter is instructive as a guide to evolving relations and strategies with the Commonwealth government and their Gypsy subjects.

For Mróz, the real shift in Commonwealth treatment of and attitudes toward Gypsies occurs in the eighteenth century, especially in the middle, and not before. In chapter 7, readers learn how Gypsies became a “criminal element” in the eyes of an increasing segment of the population. To be clear, Mróz does not believe this change corresponds with increasing rates of crimes committed by Gypsies but reflects a pernicious stereotype of Gypsy criminality taking hold in society. These negative stereotypes resulted not only in increasing unprovoked harassment and arrests but even also in lynching. Despite this increasingly hostile atmosphere, Gypsies still had many defenders in the Commonwealth, and attempts by certain authorities to prosecute them would often meet with apathy and or even stiff resistance by the citizenry or even local authorities.

The eighth chapter shows how some of the greatest promoters of the Gypsies were the powerful noble families of the Commonwealth, specifically the Sanguszko and Radziwiłł families. On massive estates of these families, Gypsies were not only harbored but also encouraged to settle. Such Gypsies were even permitted to move about for the purpose of trade to some degree, though the line was drawn at outright vagrancy. To summarize, even in the darkest times, there was rarely, if ever, an outright dichotomy in the Commonwealth with Gypsies universally excluded and unwelcome.

This book does a remarkable job covering hundreds of years of history and an impressive number and type of sources. The author expertly

explains the nature and value of these sources and demonstrates how they can be used to reveal a surprising amount of detail and paint the contours of social relations among Gypsies and between them and the general population. The author makes a compelling case for the sophistication and diversity of Gypsy relations with Commonwealth government and society, with real hostility only gradually appearing by the mid-eighteenth century. On this point the author may seem rather optimistic, as repressive laws and prejudiced encounters before this time are well documented, but even during the most hostile periods, Mróz shows, there was more happening than a naive reading of certain sources might suggest.

This book will have a large appeal to many audiences. Of course, scholars of Gypsy history, as well as Commonwealth historians, will find the results essential. Beyond this, Mróz notes the great potential for comparison of the experience of Polish Gypsies to those of Europe, especially eastern and central Europe. Finally, for scholars and interested laymen of all kinds, this book provides an accessible and illuminating case study of the changing fortunes of a minority population in a diverse society. In the current age, when societies worldwide are questioning the place of disadvantaged populations in society and are interested in how minorities find strategies to survive and thrive in often unfriendly environments, this book provides many useful and pertinent insights.

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